

# Right of Way

by Joanna Rubery

‘Stop!’ he said again, and I slammed the brakes on, jerking us forward and back. In the quiet, the windscreen wipers squealed against the glass.

My heart was beating fast. ‘I’m sorry –’

‘It’s not me you need to think about,’ he said, gently, eyeing the mirrors, but the road was quiet.

I brushed my hair out of my face. ‘I wasn’t thinking straight,’ I said, glancing at the traffic light’s red scowl of disapproval. In the mirror, I caught my reflection. I didn’t look myself.

Mr Davies glanced out of the window. The winter rain was sullen. ‘Turn left,’ he said impassively, as the light flicked green through the grey.

I took a breath, my hands clammy on the wheel. I wondered whether Andy was still simmering.

‘What I like about driving,’ said Mr Davies, staring at a schoolgirl, ‘Is the way you can close the door and leave it all behind. Take the next right.’

I concentrated on shifting lanes.

‘Do you understand me?’ said Mr Davies, quietly.

‘Yes,’ I said, in a too-high voice.

‘Straight ahead.’ He waited. ‘Everything alright at home?’

I struggled with the gearstick. ‘Everything’s fine,’ I said. This storm would pass, and everything would be just like before.

The road began to narrow. Up ahead a four-by-four was waiting, crouched.

I glanced at my instructor. ‘Who goes first?’ I asked, like a child.

‘It’s your right of way,’ said Mr Davies. ‘Go on.’ As we slid past, through puddles, he raised his hand to the driver in languid thanks. ‘It’s no good being a bleeding heart out here, you know,’ he said, after a while. ‘When it’s your right of way, you take it.’

‘I know,’ I said, but they were empty words. ‘I know.’

We cruised home along the high street. The pavement splashed with Christmas shoppers: a sharp-suited guy, a harried mum, a stressed-out – I did a double-take.

‘It’s Andy!’ I said, surprised. He must have gone to get the milk.

Mr Davies was looking at the harried mum.

‘Him, him, in the cap,’ I said, but we’d rolled past. I breathed out slowly. This was good. We’d sit down later, have a cup of tea, and everything would be just fine.

‘Take care, then,’ Mr Davies said as I got out of the driver’s seat. He turned and looked at me. I nodded.

Ten minutes later, the front door slammed.

‘I saw you,’ Andy said, ‘And your teacher.’

‘We saw you too!’ I said, grinning. ‘We –’

‘He’s a twat,’ said Andy, and disappeared. I heard the clink of bottles.

\* \* \* \*

‘Take the third exit,’ said Mr Davies. The windscreen was stained with crushed blossom. ‘How did you two get together?’

‘I chased him,’ I said, ‘for a year.’

‘Get your speed up,’ he said. ‘You must have been keen.’

‘Oh, I was,’ I said. I put my foot down harder, and smiled, fleetingly. ‘I was pretty crazy about him.’

‘Faster,’ said Mr Davies. ‘Go on. Let your hair down.’

‘Faster?’ I squeaked. We were creeping up to fifty-five. Sixty. The tyres were humming in faint harmony.

‘Don’t worry about the lorry,’ he said. ‘Let it go.’ The truck heaved past, horn blaring, engine thrumming. I felt sweat prickle on my hands. ‘At the roundabout, turn left,’ said Mr Davies, raising his voice over the roar. ‘I used to be crazy about my wife.’ We were flying, rattling along the road. ‘It gets difficult,’ he added, ‘after thirty years.’

I nodded, quickly, and checked: ‘Left?’

‘The left lane,’ he agreed, and then, as we slowed down, in the calm, ‘Do you think you’ll marry him?’

I indicated, turning this thought over. ‘He’s never asked,’ I said, eventually.

The sun was setting when I pulled into the driveway.

‘We’re getting there,’ said Mr Davies.

I let the front door close with a click. ‘Andy!’ I called out, tentatively, but all I heard was football.

\* \* \* \*

‘Take me to Halesowen,’ said Mr Davies, fiddling with the air con. ‘Remind me, when’s your test?’

‘Friday morning,’ I said, swinging onto the main road, sticky with the heat.

‘What will you do to celebrate?’ he asked.

I began to laugh: ‘You’re optimistic!’

‘Think positive,’ he said, and added, ‘what happens at this junction?’

I switched lanes, and grinned at him.

‘Will he take you out?’ he asked, fanning himself.

‘Andy?’ I shook my head. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Come on,’ he said, looking sideways at me. ‘He’ll cook you dinner, then.’

I said nothing.

‘What would he do,’ mused Mr Davies, ‘if you walked in tonight stark naked?’

I laughed again, too loudly, and said, ‘He’d tell me I was blocking the TV.’

Mr Davies said nothing.

I turned off into a side road. ‘It’s not right, is it?’ I said to the steering wheel.

‘No,’ said Mr Davies, ‘you should have gone straight on.’

I pulled up under the trees and began to do a three-point turn. Halfway through, I stalled, and stopped. His hand was on my leg. I looked at him.

‘Do you want to be happy?’ Mr Davies asked.

I kicked the car back to life. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘yes, I want to be happy.’

‘I told you,’ he said, ‘It’s no good being a bleeding heart, you know.’ He left his hand a little longer.

\* \* \* \*

On Friday night, the front door slammed. I was still trembling from the morning. (‘First time, too!’ Mr Davies had said, shaking my hand, and added, ‘No more lessons, then?’ I’d watched him turn the corner and drive away.)

Andy paused in the doorway with a brown paper bag. ‘What the hell?’ he slurred, staring at my suitcases.

‘I’ve decided,’ I told him. ‘It’s no good being a bleeding heart.’

He looked blank, so I stood up, snapping the cases shut.

‘You’re not leaving?’ Andy asked, stupefied. ‘You can’t. You can’t even drive.’

‘I can now,’ I said, ‘and it’s my right of way.’